FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
JANUARY 13, 2002

THE LIGHT
John M. Buchanan

Almighty God, we pray for your blessing on the church in this place. Here may the faithful find salvation, and the careless be awakened. Here may the doubting find faith, and the anxious be encouraged. Here may the tempted find help, and the sorrowful comfort. Here may the weary find rest, and the strong be renewed. Here may the aged find consolation and the young be inspired; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Book of Common Worship

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE LIGHT
January 13, 2002

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 29
Isaiah 9:2-7
John 1:1-14

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." John 1:5

Dear God, we come here this morning hopeful for a word from you to meet our needs, hopeful for a little light to help us see our way better, a little light in the darkness. So startle us, O God, with your truth, and come into our lives with your light and your love in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

"In the beginning was the Word."

Words are powerful. Words have power to create reality where there was no reality before. Think of the reality created by "You're beautiful and I love you." Something very real comes into existence between two people when those words are said.

"You're stupid. You're lazy. You're no good. You'll never amount to anything." Think of the reality created when those words are spoken to a child.

Words create reality where there was no reality.

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He [the Word] was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him.

That is how one ancient writer begins the story of Jesus—and the Christian faith: "In the beginning was the Word." Remember the first words in the book of Genesis: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep," and then a word was spoken. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Words are powerful. Words create new reality. And instead of a story about a birth in Bethlehem—the Fourth Gospel, written perhaps a generation after the other Gospels, begins with "The Word."

> In the beginning was the Word. . . . In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and darkness has not overcome it.

And then this incredible leap, the startling affirmation:

> "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

I loved reading or hearing, although I can't remember or find the source, that when Johann Sebastian Bach wrote the opening notes of the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, he was thinking about John 1. John Sherer has agreed to play the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor as our postlude. It is one of the most powerful compositions, I think, in all of music. It's opening figure—"In the beginning was the Word"—and then a descending cascade of notes—"the Word became flesh"—down, down to a rich, deep foundation of harmonics in which the composer constructs a complex Gothic cathedral of sound. You might want to remain for a few minutes after the Benediction and listen to it.

In the beginning was the Word. In the beginning is God's impulse to speak, to communicate. God speaks and creation happens, which, because it is a product of God's self-communication, contains the reality of God: God revealed in sun, moon, stars, in lakes, and oceans, and forests. God revealed in nature. But there is more to it than nature.

I love the way Frederick Buechner put it whimsically:

> God never seems to weary of trying to get himself across. Word after word he tries in search of the right word. When creation itself does not seem to say it right, sun, moon, stars, all of it—he tries flesh and blood. He tried saying it in Noah, but Noah was a drinking man. . . . Tried saying it in Abraham but Abraham was a little too Mesopotamian with all those wives and whiskers. . . . Tried Moses but Moses himself was trying too hard; tried David but David was too pretty for his own good. Toward the end of his rope, God tried saying it in John the Baptist with his locusts and honey and hellfire preaching and you get the feeling that John might almost have worked except he lacked something small but crucial like a sense of the ridiculous or a balanced diet.
>
> So he tried once more...Jesus as le mot juste [exactly the right word] of God. (*Wishful Thinking,* pp. 121-122)

That is the basic fundamental Christian affirmation. God high and holy—"Immortal, invisible, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes"—as our opening hymn put it. The high and holy God speaks and creation happens, speaks in human history, in the particular history of a particular people, speaks a final and ultimate word, in a human life, a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who his followers will call the Christ, the Messiah, the Word of God made flesh.

And furthermore, Christian faith will maintain that that life is the light of the world, a light that shines in the darkness, a light so resilient that no darkness ever overcomes it.

It has always been the strongest temptation of religion to focus on heaven instead of earth, pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by, instead of the earthly, sensual reality of human life. Religion has always been

tempted to be otherworldly, rather than this-worldly in the suspicion that the world is not quite right, not to be trusted, embraced, and loved. Religion has always been tempted to see as its mission to deliver people from this world into the next world, or from this world into some other world. So it has seemed to some to be an act of religious faith to deny, denigrate, or even punish the flesh, to deny human needs and appetites, to live apart from all the ambiguities and joys and sorrows of human life in this world, on this earth. John will have none of it. The eternal Word of God, by which God speaks and acts and creates reality, that Word became flesh. God's ultimate self-disclosure comes not in a beautiful sunset or a powerful storm, not in a book of wise sayings, or a philosophic treatise. God's ultimate self-disclosure comes in human flesh, this human birth, this human life, this man, what he said, how he lived, what he taught, this human life subject to the same limitations in which we all must live our lives, subject to the same joys and disappointments, the same passions, the same impatience, the same potential for despair and ecstasy—the same death.

The Word became flesh—the theological, or Christological, basis of our faith—what relevance does it have for us? What does it have to do with me? There are two implications here: one for the church as an institution, and the other for us as individuals.

First, the institution. A group of scholars, with a few ministers scattered in to keep their feet on the ground, one of whom was our new Co-Pastor, Joanna Adams, gathered recently at Columbia Theological Seminary to talk about the mission of the church in the new millennium. It was a propitious time for that discussion because there are a lot of people who have concluded that the church as we know it is about done for. The mainline denominations continue their numerical decline, and what energy they have left is pretty much expended on internal fights about sex. Someone has concluded that at the current rate of decline the last living Presbyterian will die in the year 2117. So it's a good idea to get our smart people around a table and talk about what we ought to be doing.

This symposium published a book, *Hope for the World,* and said unequivocally that this world must be the focus of the church's mission, not just trying to convert everybody. In fact, these scholars had the courage to observe that traditional Christian evangelism sometimes does violence to other cultures and people and actually contributes to the violent fragmentation of the human race. Our priority, the symposium declared, must be the world that God loves. The church must be world-oriented, in the world thoroughly in the name of Jesus, never abandoning the world no matter how ambiguous, or terrible, or sinful, or evil it seems. "Christians," they said, "do not hope to perfect the world, but they do expect and hope to change it," "The rule," they said is, "in the church, tell the story; in the world, live the story" (*Hope for the World*, Walter Brueggemann, ed.)

Let's bring that close to home. This church calls itself a "Light in the City." We have been and are clear that we are called to be a light in this city in the name of Jesus Christ, that as he was the Word made flesh, so we, together are the Word become flesh in acts of kindness, service, healing, comfort, done in his name. As he is the light shinning in the darkness, so we aspire to be that light, in worship and education and programming designed to nurture human intellect and spirits and bodies and relationships.

We tutor 500 children every week. We welcome the homeless and feed the hungry, cloth the cold. We comfort the grieving and stand with the anxious. We counsel the troubled and open our doors to the elderly and the infants. We invite the world around us to experience the beauty of music and art and join in the exploration of issues of importance to our city and nation.

And now we are looking ahead into the new millennium and launching a new initiative we have called Project Light. We are a growing church—a much larger church than we used to be, and our hopes are to enhance the way we live our life together as a community of faith. We hope to enhance our programs of education and nurture for our children, our young people, and our young adults. We hope to expand and strengthen our programs of education and faith development for adults through our Academy of Faith and Life. We intend to enhance and expand our programs for the care of our elderly members, and we intend to deepen our ability to care for the spiritual needs of all of our members. And we intend to do that by building an exciting new facility, here on this site, behind the sanctuary and parish building, to contain larger gathering spaces, a hospitable welcome center, more and better classrooms and meeting rooms, and a Wellness Center to house the Counseling Center, the Center for Health Ministry, and portions of the Center for Older Adults.

And at the same time we hope to be faithful to the mandate of Word becoming flesh and light shining in the darkness by expanding our presence in a new community that is emerging west of here in and around Cabrini-Green. We hope to build a community center, an extension of this church, to serve as a bridge for people of all income levels and racial identities who are already starting to create a new community. In the name of Jesus Christ, we will be there with a facility for recreation and education, nurture and job training, and faith formation—a light in the new city.

Those are the institutional implications of striving to follow one who is Word made flesh, light shining in the darkness.

And there are personal implications. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

You know you can't see the stars until it is really dark. City people know that. Light pollution from urban areas necessitates a trip to the country, or the beach, and there, lo and behold, the vast, shining panorama of heaven. But it has to be dark. Philosopher Joseph Campbell wrote, "Only at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The darkest moment is the moment when the real message of transformation comes."

We experienced some of that last fall. In the darkness of what happened to us, we were able to see some stars shining, stars that were always there but simply became visible to us because of the darkness.

- The bright shining stars of our love for our families, our church, our nation, which we saw clearly and experienced profoundly in darkness.

- The bright shining stars of human compassion and kindness.
- In the darkness of what happened on September 11, light began to shine: in the strength and heroism and self-sacrifice of firefighters, police officers, rescue workers, airplane passengers.

Sometimes you have to be in the darkness to see the light.

Joseph Campbell also wrote

> People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we are seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance with our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's finally about. (*The Active Life*, Parker Palmer, p. 8)

Campbell was right, I believe. What we most want is to be completely alive, to live our lives thoroughly, to live deeply, to see and experience everything we can.

And the promise is that in him, Word made flesh, the gift of life is given. In him, following him, in living the life to which he calls us, a life of serving and giving and sharing, a life of passionate commitment and sacrificial generosity, you and I become the people God created us to be. And even more, in him we know a love that will never let us go, a bond with him that not even death can sever, a light no darkness will ever overcome, a light that promises to shine in whatever darkness we encounter along the way—darkness of suffering and loss, darkness of separation and grief, darkness of disappointment and depression.

> In him was life, and life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.